The Need To Love

By Thich Nhat Hanh

Today is the New Year Day of 1998 and we are in the New Hamlet in our Winter Retreat. Today's Dharma talk is about love, the necessity to love, and the need to love.

One day the Buddha was visited by, I think, 16 people, 16 young people. They were about 30 years old. They were very bright people and they had practiced with other teachers. They had even taught the practice to many young students. They had heard of the Buddha and came as a group in order to talk to the Buddha. Each of them took turns to ask the Buddha questions about the practice. The second person who came forward and asked the Buddha questions, his name was Maitreya – it means love. The Buddha said that this young man, Maitreya, would be the next Buddha on this earth. In Asian countries on New Year Day we celebrate the coming of the Buddha Maitreya, the Buddha of love. I think it must be true that the future Buddha is somewhere, very ready to manifest to us. We have to prepare the ground for his or her appearance. I have the impression that maybe this time the Buddha will appear not as a person but as Sangha, as community. We have to be very open in order to be able to recognize the new Buddha and, whose name is love.

The first question that Maitreya asked Shakyamuni Buddha was this: Lord Buddha, is there anyone happy on earth? Who is the happy person on earth?" And then he continued, "Is there anyone who is not full of agitation in his/her mind? Is there anyone who can understand pairs of opposites without getting caught in his thinking between them? Who would you say deserves the title of 'great human being'? Who is that person who is not caught up in greed and craving?" These were the questions asked by Maitreya to the Buddha. One of the interesting questions he asked is: "Is there anyone who can understand pairs of opposites without getting caught in his thinking between them?" Pairs of opposites like birth and death; above and below, self and non-self, being and non-being… these are pairs of opposites. Not only philosophers get stuck in them, but also many of us get stuck in these pairs of opposites. Japan is a Buddhist country that used to present the future Buddha as a young person. On Christmas Sister Gina gave me a present of a very beautiful statue of Maitreya as a young person…which is very famous in Japan. I like to describe Maitreya as a young person also, surrounded by a lot of children of all kinds of colors.

We are setting up a monastery in the state of Vermont in North America. We are going to build a small Buddha Hall. In that Buddha Hall there will be a young Buddha, surrounded by children of all kinds of colors, like white, red, and so on. I think the children can help us with ideas as how to build that little Buddha Hall. We don't want to build a big Buddha Hall. We want to build a Dharma Hall, so that many people can come and listen to the Dharma talks and practice sitting meditation and Dharma discussion. But we don't want to build a very big Buddha Hall. We want to build a big Buddha Hall on the top of the hill where there are a lot of maple trees. Every time we finish a Dharma talk we will practice walking meditation uphill in order to visit the Buddha and to sit with the Buddha for about 20 minutes before we go down. I would like for people, after they have visited the Buddha, will meet the children sitting around the Buddha also. If among you there are talented sculptors, please think about the Buddha surrounded by children.

The French writer Antoine de St. Exupéry said something like this: "To love each other is not just to sit there looking at each other but to look together in the same direction." I don't know if that statement impresses you, but when I heard it, I reflected a lot on it. One day I was laughing alone, because I visualized a couple who looked together in the same direction. And that direction was the direction of the television because it's no longer a pleasure to look at each other.

In order to suffer less both of them try to look in the direction of the television set in order to forget some of their suffering. When they first got married to each other they were very excited and they spent a lot of time sitting and looking at each other. But since they don't know how to practice, how to keep their love alive, how to deepen their understanding and their compassion they continue to cause a lot of damage and a lot of distress in their relationship. One day it happened that they realized that it was no longer pleasant to look at the other person. When you look at the other person, the suffering in you is watered. Therefore, instead of looking at each other, we silently agree that it is much better that both of us look at the television. That is a real tragedy.

When we love someone, we want to believe that the person we love embodies something... something beautiful and something true. We must find in him or her something that is good, beautiful and true. Otherwise, why should we love him or why should we love her? Because we are hungry. We are hungry for something good. We are hungry for something beautiful. We are hungry for something true. (That is why we try to get some… we try to contemplate some.) And the person we love can embody these three values, the Beautiful, the Good and the True. We feel that we don't have these things. That is why when we think there is someone who has some of these things, we feel that we need him or we need her very much. In that kind of love, in that kind of need, in that kind of belief there is something serving as the base. That is the feeling of emptiness, the feeling that we lack something basic in us. We feel we don't have the basic goodness, we don't have the basic beauty, and we don't have the basic truth in us. And we wander around like this, looking for something beautiful, something good, and something true. When you have found a person whom, you think, possesses some of these things you call Good, True and Beautiful, you are so happy. But beneath that kind of happiness there is still some fear. What if this is not true beauty? What if this is not true goodness? You are afraid that what you are contemplating is fake! You are afraid that some day you will discover that the object of your love is just the object of your imagination. While loving, you imagine a lot. You create an image in your head. You are afraid that the reality does not coincide with the beautiful image you have created. That is why there is always something fearful in you. First of all, there is a feeling of lacking something in you, of emptiness. Secondly the feeling of fear. Even if you have found something, you are afraid that that something is not really what you believe… it may not be true. Even if you believe that it is true, you are still afraid because you know that things are impermanent. You think what if in three years or in five years that person does not love me anymore. That is why you urge the other person to repeat again and again the statement "I love you, darling. I love you." Because we have a feeling of insecurity and we are afraid.

In that kind of relationship you have to comfort the other person and you have to pacify him or her. You have to assure him or her that your love will be long lasting. But deep within yourself you know that things are impermanent. You have observed and you have seen that people have changed. Love in the beginning may turn out to be something very sour after two or three years. You have seen so many things like that and you don't really believe that the other person is going to love you for all his or her life. So fear is something existing in your relationship, along with emptiness and uncertainty… and fear. When we contemplate the other person, it means that we do not believe that we have in us the qualities we value in him or her. There is a need to contemplate in order to admire, because you get a feeling of happiness, a feeling of comfort when you admire the Beauty, the Goodness, and the Truth embodied by the other person. At the same time you know that the other person has an image of you in his/her head. And you are also afraid that one day he will discover that the image he has of you is not really what you are. You try to pretend and you try to play the role. You try to live up to the image that the other person has of you in his/her head. You do that with all your heart but still fear remains in you. The fear that one day he/she will discover that I am not what I pretend to be. Like someone who goes to a cosmetic shop in order to buy this and that. We want to wear this kind of things in order to appear better than what we really are.

In the spiritual and moral aspects we do the same. We use other kinds of cosmetics in order to make ourselves look better in the eyes of the person who loves us. The fact that we are using cosmetics for our body, our consciousness and for our spirit is in itself a tragedy. A tragedy, because we don't believe that we are really beautiful. So we have to try to make ourselves beautiful. We don't really believe that we are good, but we try to behave, to do things that make us look like good. We don't believe that we are true. Deep in us, there may be a feeling that we are betraying the person we love and we are betraying ourselves. And there is the feeling that you are not worth the love of the other person. We have a complex of not being worthy of him or her, who loves us. We can touch these things deeply within ourselves. These things constitute elements of our daily unhappiness for we have not tried to touch ourselves deeply. We only have a vague feeling of what we truly are. We feel that we are empty. We are not worthy. And we are going

to look for something to help us fill that kind of vacuum within us. Love may mean going to look for something so that you can fill up yourself. Something that you really need, the True, the Good and the Beautiful. And when you have found something true, good and beautiful, you are still afraid. Because you don't know whether he or she is really true, good or beautiful or if he or she is just trying to fool you. Because that someone may be fake. When you go to a teacher, a spiritual teacher, you still have that kind of fear. But the teacher may be just like any other person. A teacher may not have true beauty, true goodness, or the truth within himself/herself. He may be using "cosmetics" in order to look like a good teacher. Very often we discover that our teacher is not what we have believed him or her to be. We get angry with him/her. We get deeply disappointed and we go and look for another teacher. That is also the process of love, seeking for something we believe we really don't have in ourselves, and that we really need.

Very often we feel like we are a pot without a cover. We believe that the cover is somewhere else in the world and if we look very hard, we'll find the right cover to cover our pot. The feeling of vacuum, of emptiness is always there. We may call it the need to love, the need to be loved and the need to fill the vacuum in us with something that makes our life meaningful. So when we contemplate the other person, we have the opportunity to see what we really lack. We have the opportunity to contemplate what we think we do not have within ourselves in order to have the feeling that we have something to lean on, to take refuge in and that diminishes some of our suffering. In the meantime we also want to be contemplated. We want to be the object of attention, the object of another person's contemplation. Because the feeling of emptiness, the feeling of being a vacuum is in us, and we don't know how to embrace our own suffering. That is why we need some energy of attention from the other person. We need someone who will look at us all the time and who can embrace our emptiness, our vacuum and our suffering with his or her energy of mindfulness. And soon we become addicted to that kind of energy. Without that attention we can not live. Love, here, is the need for attention, the energy of attention from the other person helps us to feel less empty. The energy that helps to embrace the block of suffering in us. We ourselves cannot generate that energy in order to take care of ourselves. We need the energy of someone else. And when that person suffers so much, he/she does not have enough energy to embrace you, to make you suffer less… and you become disappointed. You think that the presence of that person is no longer helpful to you and your love vanishes.

(Bell)

If you are lucky, you have a chance to discover that in the person you love the element of goodness is something real. The element of beauty is something real. Since you have had the opportunity to spend a lot of time with him/her, you have had a chance to verify and to make sure that the element of Beauty, the element of Goodness is really there in the person you love. The Buddha defined Maitri, loving kindness, as beauty. If you practice loving kindness, what you experience is the Beautiful. I was very impressed when I came across that sentence. Someone who has a good heart, who is always willing to do something in order to bring relief, to bring joy, to bring the feeling of well-being to other people, if you happen to love someone like that, to know someone like that, you are very fortunate. That person is motivated by an energy to offer well being and to offer joy to other people, to animals, to vegetables. And since you have lived with him/her for some time, you have arrived at the conclusion, that this quality is real in him/her. You see it as something very beautiful. It is that energy which makes that person beautiful. When you are able to touch that energy of beauty within him/her, then you also have the opportunity to touch that very energy within yourself. You do not believe that you have it, you don't believe that you are capable of loving, of being loving, and being compassionate. You have the complex that love is not in you; you are not capable of loving. And you have suffered from that kind of feeling, and that kind of conviction. You despise yourself. You underestimate yourself. You think that you are worthless. But since you have the good fortune of loving someone who has the energy of Maitri, of loving kindness, you have a chance. Because touching that energy of love in him/her you have a chance to touch the energy of love and compassion in yourself. That is why your mindfulness is so important. Mindfulness alone helps you to recognize what is beautiful, what is good, what is real and what is true around yourself and within yourself.

The morning of Buddha's enlightenment at the foot of the bodhi tree, he was so surprised. He had been meditating for the whole night. In the early morning, at the moment when he saw the morning star, he declared, "How strange! Everyone has it! Everyone has it within himself/herself… that capacity for understanding, that capacity for awakening, and the capacity for loving. And yet, they have let themselves sink in the ocean of suffering, life after life." Enlightenment came to the Buddha as a surprise. He discovered that the capacities to love and to understand are in every one of us. But so many of us don't believe it, don't believe that we are capable of awakening that we are capable

of loving, or of understanding. That is why we have a complex of not being worthy of the person we love, of not being worthy of our ancestors, of not being worthy of our teacher… and so on. That inferiority complex, of unworthiness should be transformed. The way to transform it, is to recognize the worthiness in another person, maybe the person you love. To recognize love and compassion as a real source of energy in that person is a very important thing. Because when you touch it, you have the opportunity to go back to yourself and to touch it within yourself also. Contemplating what is in front of you turns out to be contemplating yourself. It is like when we bow to a Buddha statue on the altar, we have a chance to touch the Buddha within ourselves. There are people who have had a chance to allow the energy of understanding, of compassion, and of love in them to manifest. When these energies are manifested in themselves, they become happy people. The person who has the energy of love, of compassion, of joy, of freedom is always a happy person. If we have a chance to touch such a person, to love such a person, then we also have the chance to go back to our self and touch these beautiful things that lie deep in each one of us. Maybe there is a lot of suffering in us, a lot of doubt, a lot of despair, or a lot of jealousy in us. These layers of suffering cannot destroy the basic goodness in us, the basic love in us.

The Buddha said, "The mind is always shining like a mirror." The mind or the nature of the mind is shining. Imagine a mirror that is kept for many, many years in the mud. Now we unearth the mirror and we use water and we use a piece of cloth in order to wipe off the dust and the mud away. When the mud and the dust have been removed, the mirror is able to shine again. Our mind is the Buddha mind. Our mind has basic enlightenment, the basic capacity to reflect things as they are. Because of suffering and wrong perceptions, which are the mud and the dust in us, we have been distorting things. We have been distorting ourselves. We have been distorting the people around us. We have a lot of wrong perceptions about what is inside of us and around us, because our mirror is not able to shine, as it should. Our practice is to remove the layers of suffering and wrong perceptions, in order to allow the mirror of the mind to shine again. The belief that you have within yourself basic Understanding, basic Goodness, basic Beauty is so essential to the practice of Buddhist meditation. Usually we believe that we are not worth much. That is why we seek in another person what we think we lack. A teacher can give you some of the things you don't have, but a good teacher is one who can help you to discover the teacher within. He/she will tell you that you have to go back to your own teacher. Because within yourself is basic goodness, basic enlightenment, basic compassion, basic joy and happiness. If you go back to yourself and touch yourself deeply, you will discover that teacher within. A good teacher is the one that does not want to make you dependent on him/her. A good teacher is someone who is capable of telling you to go back to yourself and to discover the teacher within. You don't need to beg for anything. You don't need to beg for beauty. You don't need to beg for goodness. You don't need to beg for truth. You have everything within yourself. The statement that the Buddha made at the time of his enlightenment is about that: "It's so strange. Everyone has it and yet they have let themselves be carried away, sink, life after life, in the ocean of suffering."

So what does it mean to love? To love is to look at each other and to look together in the same direction. If we know how to look, then looking at each other is also wonderful. Because if you know how to look at each other and discover the basic goodness and the basic beauty within the other person and you have a chance to discover the same thing within yourself. Looking at the other person is also to look at yourself. You have a chance to discover that love is something real and existing.

Opportunities have been given to you, to each of us, to experience this. Love is something that really exists. Love is the energy helping us to be strong, to be loving and to be caring. We care for the well-being of other people and other living beings. We care about the relief of other people's suffering. We care about how to help people suffer less and become capable of happiness. When we touch someone who can embody that energy of love, we touch at the same time what we call the Beautiful. Because love is beauty. If by our own experience we know that love and beauty exist and can be generated in our daily life, our life begins to have meaning. We will suffer less, much less, right away. When we have learned how to be with people who can embody love and beauty we can learn to generate that energy of love and beauty in ourselves.

The Buddha said, the practice of Maitri, or loving-kindness brings us beauty, beauty that makes life meaningful. He also said that if you practice Karuna or compassion, what you feel is infinite space. Karuna is the kind of energy that helps you to suffer less that helps people around you to suffer less. Karuna is the kind of energy that helps to transform the suffering in us. Suffering is like the compost, the garbage. And love is like the flower. While the compost or the garbage, is not beautiful, love and the flower are beautiful. The role of suffering and the role of compost are clear. If

we know how to make use of suffering, if we know how to make use of the compost, we can bring about the flower and beauty. Understanding the suffering of other people around us and understanding our own suffering is very crucial. Because only by understanding suffering can we know how to transform the suffering into love. When beauty is there, when love is there, when compassion is there, you begin to feel a lot of space inside and around you. When we speak of love, compassion, we tend to believe that the person, who profits from that love, and from that compassion, is another person. We tend to forget that right in the moment when love is born in our heart, compassion is also born in our heart. We are the first person to benefit from it. Because love and compassion, when they are born immediately they bring beauty and happiness right away to us.

When you are determined to reconcile with a person you have been angry with, although that person is not there with you, although that person does not know that you are ready to reconcile, to forgive and to let go of everything, that willingness, that capacity to reconcile within yourself can make you feel much better right away. That is why we have to remember that the moment when the source of love and compassion begins to spring up in us, beauty is offered to us and happiness is offered to us. And together with that beauty and with that happiness there is a lot of space. That is why the Buddha said that when you practice loving kindness, you experience a lot of space. That space is the environment in which joy can be born in you. True happiness and true joy will not be possible if there is not enough space within your heart. We have space for everyone and we have space for everything. Our mind has become unlimited. Maitri is translated as loving kindness, the first element of true love. Karuna is translated as compassion, the capacity to relieve the suffering and to transform suffering. That is the second element of true love. Mudita, joy, is the third element of true love, as taught by the Buddha. The fourth element of true love is Upeksa, which means equanimity or non-discrimination. It can be translated as freedom. You love not because that person belongs to your family. You love not because he is of the same religious belief as you. You love not because he is your son, she is you daughter or your wife. You love because that person needs to be loved. That's all. You love without conditions whatsoever. It means unconditional love. You love in order to bring relief to that person, to transform the suffering in that person, to offer joy to him, to offer happiness to him because he needs that. You don't ask for anything in return. You love him because he needs your love. You love her because she needs your love. That's all. The Buddha said that when you practice equanimity, what you get is nothing at all. Nothing at all is something wonderful. Nothing at all, that means that you don't need anything. You already have everything.

When you practice Buddhist meditation, you have to learn to look at things in a very different way. When you look at your body, you may say this: "This body is not me." There is a general belief that, "I am this body. This body is mine." When we first hear the Buddha telling us that we are not this body. We don't believe it right away. The Buddha is a very respectable person; there must be something true in his statement. So I accept this statement, but I have not seen that this body is not me. Maybe after ten or twenty years of practicing Buddhist meditation, I will be able to understand something about it. But now it's very difficult for me to believe that this body is not me. This body… not only is it not me, but it is also not mine, it is not my possession. With your practice of deep looking, one day you will discover that this body is not really you. You may say that house is not me, I have bought that house. That house belongs to me. Some day, I might buy another house and I will leave the first house. That house is not me. But this body… how could it be the same? But if we practice looking deeply, we see that our body is a kind of house. And some day the house will be destroyed. We have to look in such a way that we can go beyond the body to see the truth. This body is not me.

Many of you have been here during the Summer Retreat and you have seen the lotus pond with so many beautiful flowers and many beautiful lotus leaves. Hundreds of lotus flowers bloom during the summer opening with many beautiful green lotus leaves. In winter, if you go there, to the lotus pond, you won't see any lotus flowers or any lotus leaves. In winter, you see that the leaves are decaying, rotten and just about to become mud. When you look deeply into a lotus flower, when you look deeply into a lotus leaf, you have a chance to see beyond the lotus flower and the lotus leaf. Now, in winter, deep in the mud, there are robust, big lotus roots. Let us visualize a lotus leaf, born in the month of April and living through May, June, July, August and September. If you contemplate the lotus leaf and all its beauty and if you know what is happening to the lotus root during these months… not only it displays its beauty, not only it produces other lotus leaves in the distance…if you are a senior lotus leaf, you have the duty to produce a younger lotus leaf a little bit further on. While you enjoy the sunshine, while you enjoy the water and the minerals, you are making your roots within the mud grow bigger and bigger all the time. You make other flowers and leaves arise. And they continue like you, they will continue the work of nourishing the lotus roots and producing other leaves and

other lotuses. You sit by the pond and you just look. You discover what is really the life of a lotus leaf. In winter you can recognize a leaf that is decaying, ready to become part of the mud, in order to nourish the lotus roots that are still alive deep in the mud. Suppose you come to a young lotus leaf, very green, very beautiful and you tell her, "You are not this green lotus leaf, it's not you." She may be shocked by what you say. The lotus leaf also has the capacity of experiencing the truth. She knows that she has her base deep in the mud. Each minute of her existence continues the life of the lotus. If you sit by the lotus pond at this time of the year, looking at a decaying lotus leaf, you see that the lotus leaf is still there and alive. You are no longer caught in a perception, in the object of your perception anymore. Suddenly your feeling of fear and your feeling of sorrow vanish, because you can see beyond the lotus leaf.

In wintertime, when I practice walking meditation in Upper Hamlet, I always practice awareness of the oak leaves I step on. Every time I make a step, I am able to see the oak leaf not as what I am stepping on, but I can see it much deeper. I can see it in the oak tree. I can see it a little bit everywhere and I know that this dead oak leaf is going back to the soil, to continue to nourish the soil and the roots of the oak tree. When a person dies, suddenly you feel that he or she is no longer there. There is only the dead body and you are caught by the idea of non-being. He was there, but now he is no longer there. She was there, but now she is no longer there. You get caught in a pair of opposites: life and death…to be alive - to be dead. But if you are able to look deeply into the nature of life and death, you are no longer caught in these ideas, in these concepts or perceptions.

I told my students that one day they would see me in the form of a dead leaf. And they should know how to look deeply, how to look for me beyond that dead leaf. I have lived deeply every moment of my life and I have been continued in so many ways. With the practice of looking deeply they can recognize my presence a little bit everywhere, including within themselves. So there is no reason why, when you look at the dead body of some person, you have to be caught in sorrow or you have to be caught in the idea that this person is now dead. When you go to the lotus pond and when you look deeply into a dead lotus leaf, look so deeply that you can see the lotus leaf not in the lotus leaf. You'll be able to get the kind of insight that can help you to transcend the fear of non-being. If you are able to transcend the fear of non-being, you are already able to transcend the fear of being, because non-being is just the other side of being. Being and non-being are just one pair of opposites.

The question asked by Maitreya is: "Is there anyone in the world who is not caught in pairs of opposites so that he can become utterly free?" The Buddha said, "Yes." When you become a man or a woman of nothing, you are utterly free and no fear can abide in you anymore. That is why to become a man or a woman of nothing, is to become entirely free. This body is not me. If you can go beyond the statement, if you can look deeply into your body and see that you are not this body, then you have become a person of nothing. Nothing can be a source of sorrow, nothing can be a source of anger for you anymore, because you have practiced equanimity, you have practiced Upeksa and you have become a man, a woman of nothing, namely a man or a woman of everything. I repeat what the Buddha said: When you practice Maitri you get the Beautiful. When you practice Karuna you get limitless space. When you practice Mudita, joy, you get limitless consciousness. Not only your mind is consciousness, not only your mind is perceiving, thinking, but also the thinking or consciousness is there in a cloud. Thinking is also there in the blue sky. The thinking is there in the flower. Everything is a manifestation of consciousness, and limitless consciousness is what you get when you practice Mudita. When you practice Upeksa, freedom, you become a man or a woman of nothing. You are not attached and you are not bound You are not limited by anything including your body and including your consciousness. Because consciousness is still conditioned by many elements, exactly like your body. The disintegration of your body and the disintegration of your consciousness will not be able to affect you anymore.

I would like to go back to the questions asked by Maitreya, the future Buddha. Who in the world is a happy person? We can say a happy person is there, when he is a man of nothing, and when she is a woman of nothing; not being caught in anything, and not identifying anything as himself or herself. This is a very deep practice. Even your own body, one day your body will be disintegrating like the lotus flower and that does not mean that you are disintegrating. You have to go beyond your body. You have to go beyond your consciousness. Is there anyone in the world who is not full of agitation? Agitation is what we have in our head. We are agitated by many things. Anything can make us agitated because we get caught in what we are, in what we think we are and in what we think we are not. So it is better to practice, so that we can become a man or a woman of nothing, and not caught in anything. Is there anyone who can understand pairs of opposites so that he will not get stuck in his thinking about them? Are you that person who is free from notions like being and non-being, birth and death, I and not-I? Who is there who is not caught up in the world of

craving? A man of nothing, a woman of nothing, a person who is not caught by anything as self or non-self is a free person. And this is the answer given by the Buddha. It is the person whose actions are pure and good. That person does not have the thirst of craving. That person never loses mindfulness. That person has become extinguished, calm. Extinguished here means the fire of craving, the fire of anger, the fire of ignorance is no longer consuming that person. That is the person who understands pairs of opposites without being stuck in the thinking about them. This person I would call a Great Being, a being who is free from the world of craving. This is the answer offered by the Buddha to the future Buddha, Maitreya. Today in Buddhist countries, on the first day of the year, we have the tradition of honoring the future Buddha. That is why I have brought the questions of Maitreya and also the answers given to him by the Buddha Shakyamuni.

Perhaps you have already heard the story of the Sixth Zen Patriarch. The Fifth patriarch, Hung Jen, told his disciples one day: "I want to transmit the lamp of the Dharma to one of you who will offer the best insight gatha." The Fifth Patriarch had many, many disciples, including many learned monks and nuns. One of his senior disciples, Thanh Tu, already a Dharma teacher, gave teachings to other monks and nuns in the community. He offered this gatha:

"The body is like a bodhi tree. The mind is like a mirror stand.

Again and again you have to use a duster to clean it. Do not let the dust of the world cover it."

That is why every day you have to remove, to take care of the mirror, so that the dust of the world will not be able to cover the light, the shining power of the mirror. To me this gatha is very beautiful and very practical.

In the Platform Sutra it is said that after the senior disciple Thanh Tu had presented this gatha, no one in the Sangha dared to present another insight gatha. They said that Thanh Tu is the best. "If he has presented a gatha like that, no one among us can compete with him. So let's leave it like that. He is going receive the transmission." I like the gatha too, but I have a question. In the first sentence he says that the body is like a bodhi tree and in the second sentence he says that the mind is like a bright mirror. In the last sentence he only talks about the mind and he leaves the body alone. There is no balance within the poem. That is my feeling. If I am to criticize that gatha poem... it is that he doesn't pay enough attention to the body. He said that the body is important. But he said nothing about taking care of the body. So there is an unbalance. According to the story of the Platform Sutra there was another disciple who does not know how to read or write. Since joining the Sangha, he stayed in the kitchen and did very hard work, like pounding the rice, carrying water and chopping wood. He never had a chance to meet the Fifth Patriarch. One day he saw many people bringing incense to the wall where the gatha was written. And he said, "What are you doing, my brothers?" They said, "We are burning incense to honor this new insight gatha." He said, "Would you like to read it to me? Because I don't know how to read." Then another novice read it to him. After having heard it, he kept silent and later on he said, "I also have a gatha to present. Would you like to write it down on the wall for me? I will dictate it to you." The other novice was very surprised. "You who only work in the kitchen and do not know how to read and write, you have never met the teacher and yet you want to present a poem to compete with the highest monk?" And Hui Neng said: "Please don't look at the appearance, you have to look deeply, you have to go beyond the form." So the novice consented to help. That night, when everyone went to sleep, he brought Hui Neng to the wall and Hui Neng held a torch like this and the novice climbed on a high chair and Hui Neng dictated a gatha which goes like this:

"Body is not originally a tree."

The bright mirror is not really a mirror.

Since the very beginning nothing has existed. Where can the dust fall on?

He talked in the language of the Diamond Sutra: "A tree is not a tree, that is why it is a real tree." A mirror is not a mirror that is why it is a real mirror. In the morning everyone was so impressed, because compared with the other gatha, this is much deeper.

In the morning there was an atmosphere of excitement and there were monks who said: "We don't know who is the

author of this new gatha. When I compare them, I see this new one is much deeper, the meaning is much more transcendent than the other gatha. When the Fifth Patriarch passed by, he saw a lot of talking going on and he said, "What happened?" And people told him about the second gatha. It was reported that he said, "This gatha is not to the point yet. This gatha is still weak; it does not express the Way, as it should. He used his sandal, his slipper, in order to wipe it away. Everyone said, "Well, if the master says that, it must be true that the second gatha has not met the expectation of the teacher. So they became peaceful and everyone continued to do his/her job. Later on, in the afternoon, the teacher went to the kitchen and saw Hui Neng working and he saw Hui Neng pounding the rice. The rice had to be pounded in order to taste more tender when cooked. He stopped by the place where Hui Neng was pounding the rice and asked, "Is the rice ready yet?" And Hui Neng said, "Yes, the teacher is ready." And it is said that the teacher knocked three times on the thing that was used to pound the rice and he left. At midnight of the same day Hui Neng presented himself to the place where the Fifth Patriarch used to sleep, because he understood that three sounds meant the third division of the night, midnight. He came to half open door of the teacher's room. He went in. There upon the teacher taught him the Diamond Sutra and gave him a gatha of Lamp Transmission and urged him to leave right away during that night. Because other monks would be jealous and they might run after him and take the robe and the bowl back. In the tradition, the teacher transmits to his heir his own robe and the begging bowl. The robe and bowl were given to Hui Neng, and he had to go south immediately and not to wait until the morning. In the early morning people did not see the teacher appear. They waited, waited and finally they found out that the Transmission had happened and the Dharma had gone south. A number of monks were very angry and tried to catch up with Hui Neng.

This story is very interesting. You can read it by yourself. I told you the story in order to share these gathas, because these gathas have something to do with the Dharma talk today. In the second gatha, the bodhi tree and the mirror are mentioned. The third line is about nothing exists, including the bodhi tree and the mirror. But the forth line is again dealing with the mirror only. If the mirror does not really exist, where could the dust fall on? First I would like to say that this is just a story. I don't believe that it actually took place. Because according to many researchers, there are several versions of the second gatha. But I would like to express my sympathy for the first poem. Because according to those who read the Platform Sutra, they always say that compared with Hung Neng's gatha, this one has not met the standard. What I like about this gatha is that it is very practical. It is said that your mind is like a mirror. It has a power of shining. But if you don't practice, if you allow forgetfulness, if you allow anger and wrong perceptions to cover up your mirror, then you will distort everything. Anger, like jealousy and craving will be born, because you have lost the power of shining of your own mirror or your mind. To practice the mindfulness trainings, to practice mindful sitting, mindful walking, and mindful eating is to have a chance to wipe away the dust of wrong perceptions. Then you will have a chance to let your own mirror shine brilliantly again. If the capacity to understand is there, the capacity of loving can also be there. That is why, although the first poem does not have balance concerning mind and body, the last sentence is very true and helpful. You have to live your life every day in mindfulness so you have a chance to rediscover your shining mind. With that shining mind you are free from the distortions of wrong perceptions. Anger, craving and other kinds of affliction will no longer bother you. You can make it possible for understanding and loving kindness to be reborn within yourself. As for the second gatha, it is magnificent. It is wonderful to say that looking into the bodhi tree you see that the bodhi tree is made of non-bodhi elements. You can look beyond the bodhi tree in order to realize the true nature of the bodhi tree. Looking at the bright mirror, deeply, you can see that understanding is made of non-understanding elements. You can even go beyond the bright mirror and not be caught up or attached to anything. This poem also expresses the wisdom of the Buddha, but I would like to say that without the first poem the second poem might not be very helpful.

In the history of Zen Buddhism people tend to support the teaching of of Zen transmitted by the southern school of Zen. The northern school of Zen embodied by Thanh Tu didn't last long, nor have many descendants to carry on the teaching. My insight is that Thanh Tu and Hui Neng should be brothers working hand in hand. While we praise the gatha given by Hui Neng, the sixth patriarch, we also have to offer incense to the gatha of Thanh Tu because it gives us very practical recommendations as how to practice in our daily life. Its meaning is that it is very easy for the dust of anger, hatred, craving to fall on our mirror at any time of the day. That is why practicing walking mindfully, eating mindfully and sitting mindfully is so crucial, and practicing the mindfulness trainings in our daily life is also a very fundamental practice. If we abandon that practice of mindfulness, if we only talk about the contents of the Diamond Sutra I'm afraid that we may lose the foundation, and we will not succeed in our attempt to transform the suffering in us.

Dear Friends,

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